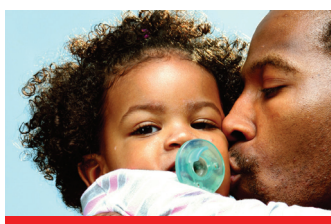


Learnings from the field

Supporting Fathers

*"I came to understand the importance of fatherhood through its absence—both in my life and in the lives of others. I came to understand that the hole a man leaves when he abandons his responsibility to his children is one that no government can fill."*ⁱ —President Barack Obama



SEEDCO'S DADS AT WORK PROGRAM: Helping Low-Income, Noncustodial Fathers Support Their Children

The Absent Father Challenge

Nearly one out of every three children in the United States lives apart from their biological fathers.ⁱⁱ About 40 percent of these children live in poverty, compared to nine percent of children growing up in households where fathers are present.ⁱⁱⁱ The social impact of a father's absence on children is equally apparent. Considerable research demonstrates a positive correlation between a father's involvement and his child's avoidance of high-risk behaviors, higher self-esteem and better academic performance.^{iv}

Although these men are frequently caricatured as "deadbeat dads," the truth about low-income, noncustodial fathers is substantially more complex. Many fathers would like to be more involved in their children's lives but are unable to make meaningful connections due to a variety of serious and inter-related barriers. Most "absent" fathers are low-income, with limited work history and, in many cases, criminal histories or other significant barriers to financial self-sufficiency. In fact, in a 2007 study of child support payments in arrears in nine states, 70 percent of arrears were owed by noncustodial fathers reporting less than \$10,000 a year in income—about 25 percent of whom had no reported income.^v

Interpersonal and emotional issues among low-income, noncustodial fathers also cannot be ignored. Rifts with the custodial parent can limit or even eliminate a father's relationship with his child. Lack of employment can lower his self-esteem and diminish his ability to feel like a provider. These issues in turn contribute to depression, anger, and other mental health problems that further complicate a noncustodial father's ability to connect.

While welfare reform and other policy changes in the 1990s that strengthened the capacity of child support collection agencies to find and penalize noncompliant noncustodial parents resulted in an increase in collection efforts, services to address the specific barriers that these parents face have not kept pace. As a result, many remain outside the reach of the child support and social services systems.

What's more, the specter of wage garnishment and other penalties has led many noncustodial parents to shun the formal economy.^{vi} Anecdotally, many fatherhood programs report that low-income, noncustodial fathers work off the books to support their children through direct contributions to the custodial parent instead of through the child support system—which in some cases withholds a portion of child support payments to reimburse welfare costs instead of passing them in their entirety through to the custodial parent.



The Response

Reducing the levels of father absence in low-income communities has the potential to decrease poverty rates and transform the lives of children who might otherwise grow up without the guidance of a father.

Many noncustodial parents are simply disconnected from their families emotionally and financially because of challenges they are facing in their own lives. This requires policy makers, funders and human services providers to develop responses that both address father absence and tackle the underlying causes of it, starting with comprehensive strategies to increase access to economic opportunity for low-income fathers.

For more than a decade, state- and privately funded efforts have been pioneering approaches to increase low-income, noncustodial fathers' involvement in their children's lives. Beginning with a handful of demonstration projects during the 1990s and early 2000s, hundreds of fatherhood programs have sprung up across the country in recent years. Private philanthropy continues to underwrite many of these efforts while federal, state and local policy makers have increasingly taken notice and initiated publicly funded programs. For example, many states have supported these efforts with funding from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program, which provides the mandate to serve low-income, noncustodial parents and the flexibility to test various approaches.

These father-focused programs can be generally grouped into three categories:

- **Employment-focused** programs seek to train and place low-income, noncustodial fathers in jobs. Building job skills and helping these men boost their income is viewed as a promising way to increase their child support payments, as well as their financial and emotional role in their children's lives. Dating back to 1999, 29 states reported employment and training programs for low-income, unemployed fathers.^{vii}



A Dads at Work participant and his daughter

- **Nurturing** programs work to build low-income noncustodial fathers' capacity as caregivers and parents. Research highlighting the importance of fathers' involvement in their children's lives has provided both a social and long-term economic rationale for this approach. In 1999, 36 states reported implementing "fathers as nurturers" initiatives.^{viii}
- **Healthy marriage** programs promote the institution of marriage and teach marriage skills. These programs attempt to increase the number of children raised by two parents by encouraging parents to stay together. Between 2002 and 2004, 15 states used TANF funds to support healthy marriage programs.^{ix}

Seedco's Solution: A Comprehensive Approach

Seedco—a national nonprofit organization that advances economic opportunity for people, businesses, and communities in need—has served noncustodial parents through its workforce and asset-building programs for more than 10 years. In 2006, as part of a statewide pilot funded through the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance's Strengthening Families Through Stronger Fathers Initiative, Seedco launched its first official program tailored to meet the needs of noncustodial parents, the Fatherhood Initiative Pilot Program.

Drawing on the lessons learned from earlier fatherhood programs and using the principles of behavioral economics, Seedco's Fatherhood Initiative Pilot Program used an employment model that first addressed the most pressing need of these fathers—access to jobs and benefits.

Seedco then worked with community-based partners to integrate customized services to help noncustodial parents engage with their children, connect to the formal child support system and establish productive parenting relationships. Those services included:

- Intensive case management and counseling, such as assistance with substance abuse problems and anger management.
- Parenting training with a focus on managing a healthy relationship with the custodial parent and maintaining an active and positive role in the lives of their children.
- Legal services, including criminal record checks and rap sheet cleansing, and help with other legal needs such as child support orders.
- Financial counseling, including assistance managing finances to meet child support obligations and repairing credit scores to improve financial standing.

- Access to income-enhancing work supports, including a tax season campaign to provide eligibility screening and application assistance for New York's new and expanded Earned Income Tax Credit for noncustodial parents.
- Child support order payment incentives, including an innovative loan product that provided low-interest, flexible-term financing to noncustodial parents in arrears.

During the pilot, **legal assistance was among the most heavily utilized of the services provided and positively correlated with a participant's ability to find a job.** Of those who used legal services, 53 percent found employment, while only 44 percent of those who did not use legal services found work. Over three years, the pilot program served more than 875 noncustodial parents—49 percent and 48 percent of whom were Hispanic and African American, respectively—at four sites in New York City. Further, 41 percent of participants had not attained a high school diploma or GED, and four in five had not completed any post-high school education.

Despite these barriers, the pilot met its goal of helping 56 percent of program participants find employment. Indeed, an Urban Institute evaluation of the five fatherhood pilot programs established by the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance found that Seedco's reported the highest job placement rate.

Seedco's Dads at Work Program

The success of the pilot provided the foundation for Seedco's Dads at Work program, which was launched at sites in Manhattan, Brooklyn, and the Bronx in June 2010 with TANF funds provided through the New York State Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance.

Each of the services provided in the pilot—particularly legal services related to child support—is expanded in the Dads at Work program. In addition, building on the experience of the pilot, the expanded program also offers new types of assistance, involves new partnerships, and targets new types of populations.

For example, Seedco's experience working with noncustodial parents demonstrates that mental health issues are often barriers to keeping a job, creating positive personal relationships, and transitioning to life after incarceration. Further, cultural stigma and unsupportive systems often prevent those mental health issues from being addressed.

To tackle this problem, Seedco designed an on-site mental health component that includes workshops, individual sessions, family and relationship counseling, and referrals to more specialized services as needed.

Legal Services Correlate with Employment Success

44% found jobs
WITHOUT UTILIZING
LEGAL SERVICES
PROVIDED

53% found jobs
UTILIZING LEGAL
SERVICES PROVIDED

Success Story

Joaquin Ramirez was referred by the court to the Seedco pilot program because he was not paying child support. He rarely saw his child, owed \$18,000 in arrears, and was frustrated and angry. After participating in support groups, legal services, job readiness and other program activities, Ramirez is now employed as a full-time security guard, pays child support and visits his child weekly.



These mental health services, normally so underutilized by noncustodial parents, not only improve their personal well-being, but also advance the overall goals of the program, including family engagement, economic stability and timely child support payments.

In addition, because many noncustodial parents sometimes take care of their children, the Dads at Work program—working with the William Randolph Hearst Burn Center at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital—also provided free workshops on child safety in the household that includes basic first aid and burn prevention.

Dads at Work also teamed up with the U.S. Department of Education and two underserved schools in the Bronx to offer participants workshops on the important role they can play in their children's academic lives by reading to them and helping with their homework. And Seedco partnered with the Columbia University School of Public Health to offer fatherhood services at six early childhood programs in high-need communities in New York City with the goal of increasing the number of noncustodial parents participating in Dads at Work.

Finally, and uniquely, Dads at Work integrated fatherhood initiatives with other supports provided by Seedco—offering participants expert assistance in applying for a range of benefits for which they are eligible, including Medicaid and the Earned Income Tax Credit.

To sum up, Seedco's Dads at Work helps noncustodial parents enter the workforce, meet their financial obligations, and have a positive impact on the lives of their children. Seedco and its community-based partners are meeting these objectives by providing services tailored to low-income noncustodial parents.

Dads at Work represents a fresh, integrated and comprehensive approach to providing noncustodial parents the services, supports and incentives needed to connect to the formal economy—and, most important, to play a vital role in improving their children's lives.

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This is one in a series of learning briefs on Seedco's work to advance economic opportunity for people, businesses, and communities in need.

SEEDCO: A LONG HISTORY OF ADVANCING ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY

Seedco is a national nonprofit organization that advances economic opportunity for people, businesses, and communities in need. Seedco designs and implements innovative programs and services for workers, families and businesses. We advance vibrant community economic development through three lines of work: workforce development, work and family supports, and community finance and small business services.

In addition to our direct service work, we analyze, assess and develop best practices to inform our work, as well as that of other practitioners, researchers and policy makers. We provide technical assistance to federal, state and local governments; funders; and nonprofit agencies. Visit www.seedco.org to learn more.

